

Kenya's chance
Financial Times

A thousand dead; 300,000 displaced; a country on the brink of civil war: the results of Kenya's 2007 general election, marred by vote-rigging and violence, make grim reading. The country's latest trip to the polling booths has been altogether more positive. On August 4, Kenyans voted by a two-thirds majority for a new constitution.

Given the precedents, the mere fact that the vote was well organized and peaceful was a triumph. Backed by both Mwai Kibaki, the president, and Raila Odinga, his prime minister and bitter rival in 2007, Kenya's new constitution offers the country a chance of unity. But better still, it deals with some of the country's persistent problems.

The powers of the president will be curbed. Greater power will be devolved to Kenya's regions, which should both make local politicians more accountable and ensure tribes which miss out on the presidency still have a say in domestic affairs. The establishment of a committee with the power to repossess and redistribute land acquired illegally should ease the struggles of Kenya's landless youth. These changes should limit the scope for political patronage.

Caveats apply. In the Rift Valley, the source of the upheavals in 2007, the constitution was rejected as decisively as it was accepted elsewhere. The government forestalled violence by sending 10,000 police to the area before the vote. It must now also address the simmering discontent among the local Kalenjin majority who rejected the constitution due partly to fears that they are losing influence in their traditional heartland.

Kenya's constitution must still be ratified – clause by clause – by its parliament. This will offer ample scope for troublemaking. There are also limits to what constitutions can achieve. Kenya's latest offering will not in itself change the climate of corruption and impunity that hangs over political circles. No senior government figure has been tried for corruption in the last decade, despite an impressive array of candidates. This needs to change.

As Kenya heads towards elections in 2012, its allies should back its efforts at reform. In a region of troubled states wracked by instability and extremism, Kenya has immense significance as a broadly pro-western democracy, fragile as it is. Although previous bouts of optimism have been undermined by events, the country's sense of rebirth should be encouraged. The latest wind of change to sweep through the country could just bring lasting good.

The Financial Times editorial may also be accessed [here](#).

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